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Visual representation of prosody for tactful communication skills - the case of request in Japanese as a Foreign Language taught to French university students

KAMIYAMA Takeki, Laboratoire de Phonétique et Phonologie (UMR 7018),
CNRS / University of Sorbonne Nouvelle – Paris 3
YAMAMOTO Yoshino, Charles de Gaulle University – Lille 3

Abstract Prosody conveys not only linguistic but also paralinguistic information. Some features are language-specific, and L2 learners have to learn them implicitly or explicitly. For instance, some French learners of L2 Japanese produce expressions of request with a prosody that can sound somewhat rude to native speakers, especially if they do not diminish intensity enough at the end of the sentence. This article reports how the appropriate prosody was taught through explicit instruction and repetition task, with the aid of visual representation.

1 Background Some foreign/second language learners end up producing utterances which sound rude to native listeners. Learners have to use not only appropriate vocabulary items, expressions, constructions, and communication strategies, but also appropriate prosody that accompanies them. However, similar prosodic patterns do not necessarily convey similar paralinguistic information across languages. It was shown that some attitudes were perceived easily by non-native listeners, while others were confounded when they formed prosodic “faux amis” (Shochi et al. 2006 for French and Japanese). It is therefore essential to teach the appropriate prosodic patterns of L2 explicitly when they differ from the ones expected in the native language of the learners.

In the case of Japanese taught to French university students as a foreign language, we notice cases of this kind in expressions of request or refusal, which could threaten the face of the recipient of the message. Inappropriate prosody produced by learners might offend the listener, who, in the case of request, would be reluctant to do them a favour, and hinder a fluent communication in spite of the learner’s intention to succeed in the interaction. Learners at elementary level might be excused, but advanced learners who speak fluently would not be, since the expectation of the listener is higher. It is a pity that a highly fluent learner should be considered rude simply because they do not produce appropriate prosody. It is therefore important to teach it explicitly in language classes.

The present paper reports the instruction given to the students of Japanese at Charles de Gaulle University (Lille 3) in France, with a focus on the visual representation of prosody used in the classes.

2 Expressions of request and prosody in Japanese In the present paper, we take three expressions of request: 1) “V + *te itadakemasenka*”, 2) “V + *te itadakemasen deshouka*”, 3) “V + *te itadakeruto arigataindesuga*”. The first two forms end with the interrogative particle “*ka*”. Interrogative sentences with “*ka*” are usually pronounced with a final rise on the last syllable, namely, “*ka*” (Abe 1998, among others). However, in the case of the expressions of request, the final rise is smaller in 1), and almost inexistent in 2), even though the sentences are morphologically and syntactically interrogative. The figure 1 shows two sentences “*kaite itadakemasenka*” and “*kaite itadakemasendeshouka*” (*kaite* < *kaku* “to write, to draw”) pronounced by the instructor of the classes (female native speaker of Japanese).

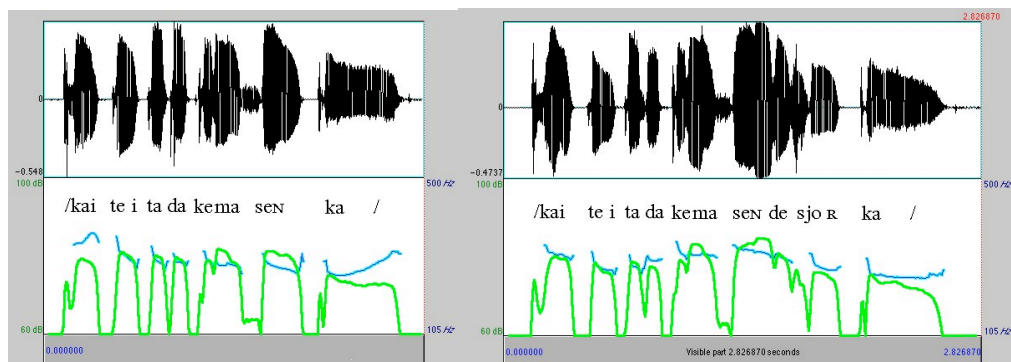


Figure 1. Sentences /kaite itadakemasenka/ (left) and /kaite itadakemasendesjorka/ (right) pronounced by the instructor of the classes (female native speaker of Japanese). The continuous curve represents intensity, the other one the F0 (fundamental frequency) curve. /n/ is a moraic nasal, and /R/ is the second half of a long vowel.

We notice that the syllable /ka/ at the end of the sentences is lengthened, though the vowel is phonemically short. In the expression "... *masenka*", F0 is slightly rising, while the intensity is decreasing. We can observe a similar tendency in "... *masendeshouka*", except that F0 is flat during /ka/. In both cases, the intensity of the syllable /ka/ is smaller than that of the preceding syllables in spite of the relatively high intrinsic intensity of the vowel /a/. This indicates that the decrease in intensity is quite important for this particle¹.

The construction "V + *te itadakeruto arigataindesuga*" is a more indirect expression that could be translated as "(I) would be grateful if ...". The morpheme "*ga*" is an adversative conjunction, and therefore, the sentence is not finished syntactically and is sometimes transcribed with suspension points in spelling. The prosodic features are similar to those of "... *masendeshouka*", that is to say that the final syllable is lengthened, F0 stays flat, and the intensity decreases progressively.

3 Learners' production before instruction The difficulties that the learners encounter in producing the prosodic patterns described above are the following: 1) constructions "... *masenka*" and "... *masendeshouka*" are morphologically and syntactically interrogative. For those who have acquired the final rise in interrogatives, these are new prosodic patterns associated with syntactically similar constructions. 2) In many languages, high F0 is associated with politeness (Ohala's "frequency code": Ohala 1984 and 1996), while it is not necessarily the case in Japanese (Ito 2002). Therefore, making a polite request without a high final rise may not be instinctively natural to the learners.

Figure 2 shows two sentences "*kaite itadakemasenka*" and "*okutte itadakemasendeshouka*" (*okutte* < *okuru* "to send") pronounced by two different learners (male native speakers of French), and perceived as rude by the instructor. We notice that the final particle "*ka*" was pronounced with a remarkable rise in both cases, and that the intensity of this syllable is not smaller than that of the preceding syllables (compared even with the vowel /a/ in the syllable /ma/). In the second example, the vowel duration of the syllable /ka/ is lengthened as in the pronunciation of the instructor (figure 1), but it is not the case in the first one.

¹ To our knowledge, there seems to be no experimental study which showed this tendency in this given context.

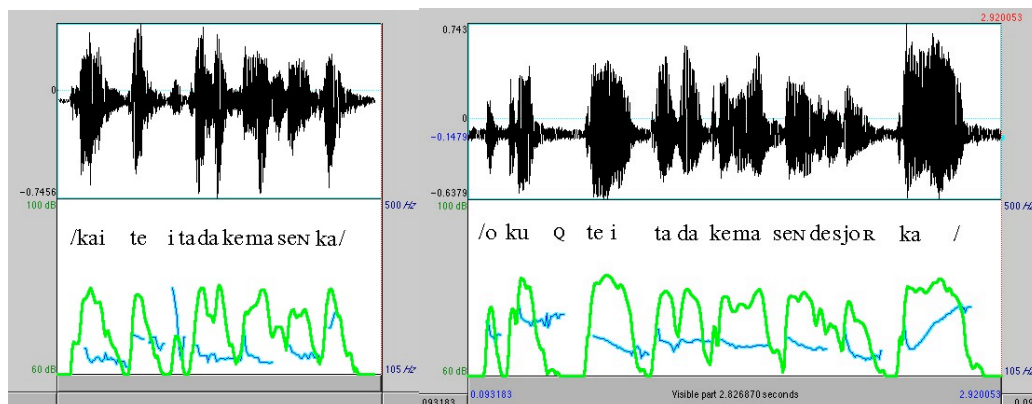


Figure 2. Sentences /kaite itadakemasenka/ (left) and /okuQte itadakemasendesjorka/ (right) pronounced by two different learners (male native speakers of French). The continuous curve represents intensity, the other one the F0 (fundamental frequency) curve. /Q/ is the second half of a geminate obstruent.

4 Instruction in classes: the aid of visual representation The instruction of prosodic patterns was carried out in regular classes. The learners were told to repeat after the instructor with the aid of visual representation projected on a screen. Following parameters were included in the representation: F0, intensity, and voice quality.

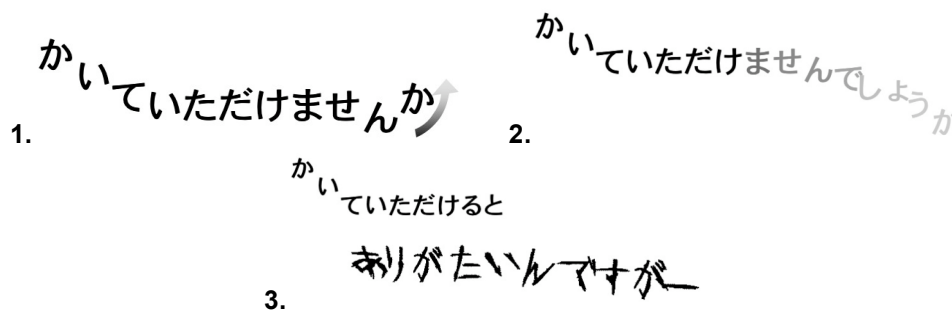


Figure 3. Visual representation of F0, intensity and voice quality shown in the classes. 1) “kaite itadakemasenka”, 2) “kaite itadakemasendeshouka”, 3) “kaite itadakeruto arigataindesuga”.

4.1: F0 There are a number of F0 representation systems for intonation². To cite some of them, Tanaka & Kubozono (1999) use schematized pitch curves, and Matsuzaki proposes “prosody-graph”, which figures circles and ellipses that trace the extracted F0 curve of sentences (cf. Matsuzaki et al. 1999). In the present case, besides the use of F0 curves, we also adopted another system where *kana* letters were placed higher or lower according to a schematized pitch curve (fig.3-1, 2, 3).

4.2: Intensity To our knowledge, transcriptions that take intensity into consideration are almost inexistent. We used grey scale to represent the decrease in intensity (fig.3-1, 2).

4.3: Voice quality In making requests, native speakers of Japanese often manifest the attitude of “*kyoshuku*”, which Sadanobu (2004: 34) defines as follows: “a mixture of suffering ashamedness and embarrassment, (which) comes from the speaker’s consciousness of the fact that his/her utterance of request imposes a burden to the hearer”. “*kyoshuku*” is expressed by a pressed,

² We treat sentence or phrase intonation separately from lexical accent.

creaky voice quality. Figure 3-3 shows the font “*Onryo*” which would help learners to notice and acquire this voice quality.

5 Results of the instruction and perspectives After working on these prosodic features explicitly, the instructor found differences between the learners who attended the classes and those who didn't: the former had raised consciousness on pronunciation, and produced less often utterances of request that sounded rude. Informal feedback given by some learners who participated actively includes following comments: they became conscious of prosody and they would pay more attention to it; the visual representation was very helpful; the use of different fonts and greyscaling helped them to raise consciousness; they got motivated to work further on prosody.

In the present article, we have only reported some remarkable utterances to illustrate the tendency studied. We have yet to conduct a series of quantitative studies to see if 1) the observed prosodic tendency is systematically produced by native speakers; 2) learners show the observed tendency systematically before instruction; 3) there is a measurable (by a listening experiment with native speakers, for instance) improvement after the instruction.

For future pedagogical developments, we will have to conceive material to support autonomous learning. Combining the visual representation with sound files of the model pronunciation will encourage learners to study autonomously.

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